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SUBJECT: FRANCE'S GOT TALENT: REACHING OUT TO YOUNG LEADERS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. "Reform" in the political, economic, and social arenas is a common driver behind the diverse activism of the almost 50 young, rising French leaders who participated in an outreach event hosted by the Embassy on December 2. Representing a wide swatch of the French political spectrum -- including local elected officials, key staff for National and European Parliamentary leaders, and NGO activists -- these up-and-coming leaders enthusiastically shared their insights with Emboffs on a range of issues, capped by the upcoming battle for regional elections.

Emphasizing technology as the key to getting their message to the public, they described how they are using new media to attract support for their issues, from campaign organization to the environment. Curious about President Obama's administration and decision-making process, they openly, and deftly, discussed U.S. policy, particularly on Afghanistan. The backgrounds, networks, and goals of some of the attendees provide a window on the future landscape of French political leadership.

Tech-Savvy Youth Getting Out Their Message . . .

¶2. (SBU) From the Deputy Mayor of Versailles, Francois-Xavier Bellamy, to Reda Didi, a social worker who has participated in post's Public Affairs programming, hails from Fresnes, and is involved in developing a slate of independent candidates for the 2012 legislative election, the rising French politicos who attended the Embassy's early December outreach event for young leaders frequently mentioned "reform" as the key to a better future, emphasizing the need for increased opportunities for participation by a new generation in the French policymaking establishment. Such reform depends on disseminating new ideas and political messages out to other youth and a general population who increasingly inform themselves via podcasts and YouTube on their blackberries. Young French campaigners are learning everything they can from the 2008 internet outreach of President Obama's campaign. Tech-savvy young French leaders able to exploit this trend are building their own bright futures. Thomas Mimra, for example, oversaw the 2007 digital campaign for then-presidential candidate Sarkozy. Although no longer a member of the UMP, he remains close to the party and to Henri Guaino, a key advisor to Sarkozy. Mimra, who has developed ties to colleagues in Lebanon and Egypt, is currently engaged in creating a think-tank focusing on Euro-Mediterranean issues. Michael Benhamou serves in the press section of the Elysee, and will conduct a special Elysee mission to Kosovo in January. Benhamou was the UMP's choice to cover the U.S. election from Washington in 2008. Frederic Neau led the internet campaign for Europe-Ecologie -- considered by some as a "massive success" for getting out its message during the European elections. One French interlocutor speculated that the traditional career path is becoming more open and less restrictive due to the new technologies. His comment: "While the traditional path is still dominant, it is no longer the only path to political success. And Sarkozy is an example. It will take time, but

change has begun."

. . . And Amplifying Our Message

¶13. (SBU) As the outreach event took place on the heels of President Obama's rollout of Washington's new strategy on Afghanistan, Embassy officers reinforced POTUS' message with the participants. Post drew upon Public Affairs' extensive French language tools to answer questions and outline what is at stake in the alliance for a young, politically savvy crowd. Their response was favorable, including some who said they were more receptive to our arguments in favor of increased contributions than the French media's coverage -- which focuses on senior party leaders' opinions -- might lead us to believe. One French attendee volunteered that not only was he in agreement with President Obama's policy on Afghanistan, but he also viewed the U.S. president as a careful and thoughtful decisionmaker in comparison to Sarkozy, whom he characterized as sometimes too quick and less thorough in his decisionmaking.

Honing Their Skills at the Grassroots

¶14. (SBU) The regional elections slated for 2010 dominated conversation among the young leaders, who agreed that President Sarkozy would try to make the elections a test of his mandate at the midterm and use the results to pave the way for a government reshuffle to build the team he will lead going into the 2012 Presidential elections. They noted that center left parties -- who remain in disarray at the national but still control 20 of the 22 regions whose fate will be decided in March -- must campaign on local issues in an attempt to deliver a defeat to Sarkozy. That said, with the Copenhagen Summit in the spotlight, the Europe-Ecologie group (represented at the outreach event by Neau, Caroline

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Soubayroux and Jean-Baptiste Malet) are hoping for a strong showing in regional elections, driven by the belief that the public is more receptive to Ecolo's "sustainable development" argument -- which they say is broader and less frightening to the business community and other interest groups than the traditional "Verts" ("Greens") program. The Ecolos rely upon a very young demographic base which is growing faster than that of other political parties, and they are convinced that they have a strong chance to win in at least one region, with 3-4 regions being their ambitious goal. Their message is popular with youth, and the young find them more believable than other parties which, according to the Ecolo representatives, are increasingly "stealing" Ecolo policy platforms to attract voters, but are viewed as simply paying lip service to the issues without demonstrating commitment to action.

Diverse Interests but a Common Passion

¶15. (SBU) The young leaders who attended the outreach represented diverse backgrounds and a wide array of political persuasions, while sharing a common passion about their varying issues. In fact the event brought together minority leaders, including those who participated in PA programs, with their compatriots following the more classic route to power in French politics. A snapshot of some leaders to watch that demonstrates such diversity and drive includes:

Benjamin Benita -- well-connected in the Middle East (especially in Israel and Palestine), Benita works for a large public museum for outreach in the whole Mediterranean area and is close to the Socialist Party; Pierre Catalan -- a dynamic individual who is currently a top consultant for a leading public relations agency, EURO RSCG, Catalan is a member of the "Jeunes Européens," wrote for *Liberation.fr* during the European elections campaign, and is now focusing full-time on the Greens regional campaign; Mohamed Chirani -- a political activist who works in the prefecture of Saint-Denis, especially in the "tough" areas of

the suburbs, Chirani has a rare expertise regarding these issues; Thibault Delahaye -- a young militant, who like many of the young leaders we met, started his political life with the 2005 referendum on the European Constitution, Delahaye is a member of the inner circle of the supporters of current IMF chief and potential future socialist party presidential candidate Dominic Strauss-Kahn. An elected member of the Malakoff (a suburban area of Paris), and a member of the bureau of youth socialists, he is simultaneously serving as assistant to two MP's and finishing his law degree; Jean-Baptiste Malet -- a 22-year-old candidate for the Greens at the most recent cantonale elections, Malet received a respectable 15% in an area that is not particularly Green-friendly and will be in charge of content for the "Verts" in the forthcoming regional elections; and Phillippe Perchoc -- founder of the think tank, "Nouvelle Europe," Perchoc -- who comes from a Christian-right pro-European political family and is a PhD student at Science-Po who published more than 60 articles last year -- specializes on the Baltics and has an extensive network in Central and Eastern Europe.

Looking to the U.S. for Inspiration

¶6. (SBU) Whatever their party affiliation, the young leaders consistently embrace the "positive politics" they ascribe to President Obama. One young leader noted that he was in New York at the time of the U.S. election in 2008 and wished he had been an American in order to vote for President Obama. Indeed, many of the young French leaders had some experience either studying or working in the United States. For example, Benjamin Bechaux, a former adviser of Jean-Pierre Jouyet (European Minister during the French Presidency of the European Council) and now an adviser of the SIG (Service d'information du Gouvernement) -- the French Government's public affairs agency -- spent a year serving in the French Consulate in Houston. Soubayroux (Europe-Ecologie) just returned to France after a year at Harvard.

¶7. (SBU) This event builds on a series of training programs and exchanges for young elected officials in France from disadvantaged backgrounds launched this year by the Public Affairs section in Paris. The cumulative impact of this programming is now becoming evident as these young leaders with enhanced skills grow in status and self-confidence. They have responded very positively to Embassy overtures. Indeed, the young leaders invited to our event expressed a high degree of appreciation and enthusiasm, with the attendance and response rate from this group of invitees exceeding that of any other event we have hosted this year. In addition to promoting new relationships, the event was a source of considerable good will, with one participant,

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representing an EU NGO, remarking that "not a single one of the European Union's 27 member country embassies has ever invited us to something like this." Among those who expressed their interest in continuing to dialogue through such a forum were Benjamin Lancar -- the leader of the UMP's youth wing, "Jeunes Populaires," who relished discussing with Emboffs the recent Obama vs. Sarkozy article in the French periodical, L'Express, and who, as another attendee remarked, is likely to win a safe conservative seat in the 2012 legislative elections -- and Johannes Hommel, a member of the Socialist Party and assistant to two members of the National Assembly, who belongs to the inner circle of "Strauss-Kahniens," preparing the political comeback of current IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn in 2012. (Strauss-Kahn lost an earlier bid to secure the Socialist party's presidential nomination.) Their reaction indicated that these types of events provide a unique opportunity to create a positive image for America among such future leaders, and also to convey substantive information to a receptive audience, such as Christophe Rousset, who has organized UMP debates on Afghanistan; Camille Roux, the young

CEO of "Intelknowledge," an economic intelligence organization; and Delphine Alles, a professor of South Asian Studies at Sciences Po, where many of France's future politicians receive their university-level education. It has also vastly expanded our window on debates among emerging groups as they have invited us to attend, and in the future speak, at some of their events.

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